

Government in Unexpected Places\*

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Any adequate account of English syntax must distinguish (at least) two different situations in which a verb can appear without a direct object, as illustrated in (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. Kim vanished.  
b. Kim noticed.  
c. Kim noticed it.

In (1a) I will say that the object is *missing*, *lacking*, or *absent*, while in (1b) I will say that an object is present, but is *empty* or *null*. Examples like (1a) involve 'absolute intransitive' verbs, verbs that are subcategorized to occur without objects. Examples like (1b) involve verbs that are subcategorized to occur with objects, but that permit objects with the feature [+NULL]. Definite NPs with this feature are interpreted as discourse-anaphoric, so that (1b) is fully acceptable only in a context in which the referent of the object of *noticed* has been identified, in which case (1b) paraphrases (1c).<sup>1</sup>

Now consider the example in (2a), involving an 'absolute transitive' verb (*construct*, *build*, *make*, etc.). Like *notice* in (1b), such verbs are subcategorized to occur with objects. Unlike *notice*, however, they cannot have [+NULL] objects, even when a discourse context is supplied, as in (2b).

- (2) a. \*Kim constructed.  
b. The pieces of the bicycle lay on the porch. Finally Kim constructed \*(it).

What are we to say about these (very familiar) facts? Apparently certain verbs require not only that they have objects (as *notice* does), but also that their objects be [-NULL]. That is, these verbs (*construct* among them) impose the feature [-NULL] on their objects.

The part of syntax devoted to the imposition of features by one sister constituent on another is the theory of (morphosyntactic) *government*. Though morphological case features are the governed features that have gotten the most attention in the literature, a wide range of morphosyntactic features can be governed; Zwicky (1986) alludes to the government of English verb forms by auxiliaries, to the government of nominal number by numerals within Russian NPs, and to the government of adjectival declension class by determiners in German. I am suggesting that verbs can also govern nonemptiness on their objects.

The paradigm in (2) holds not only for absolute transitives but also for causative transitives like *boil* and *roll*. (3a) can be understood only intransitively, even when a discourse referent is supplied for the object, as in (3b).

- (3) a. Kim boiled.
- b. There was a chicken in the pot. Kim boiled \*(it).

I now observe that the separation of subcategorization facts about verbs like *construct* and *boil* from government facts about them is supported by observations about the registers of English.

In various 'instructional' registers in English, in particular recipes and instructions for assembly, the government condition for certain verbs can be lifted, while subcategorization requirements remain untouched. Examples like those in (4) are possible only when this (very special) discourse context has picked out the referent of the object.

- (4) a. The T-16 bicycle has 243 component parts. Begin to construct (it) by screwing part 15 into hole A of part 157.
- b. Take a chicken and clean (it). Put (it) in a pot and boil (it) for two hours.

Such examples have [+NULL] objects, not missing objects.

Finally consider the facts that make English *not* a 'pro-drop' language, namely the familiar requirement that English finite clauses must have a subject, as illustrated in (5). In the framework I've suggested, what's going on here is government of a [-NULL] subject by finite Vs (or perhaps VPs) in English.

- (5) a. \*Just can't keep myself satisfied.
- b. \*Seems we are going to have a tornado.

Once again, a government condition can be lifted in particular registers and styles, in this instance in the epistolary register and generally in conversational style. As many have observed, the sentences in (5) are entirely acceptable in these contexts.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup>See Fillmore (1986) for discussion of various types of [+NULL] objects and the conditions on their occurrence, as well as for bibliographic references.

### References

- Fillmore, Charles J. 1986. Pragmatically controlled zero anaphora. To appear in BLS 12.
- Zwicky, Arnold M. 1986. German adjective agreement in GPSG. To appear in *Linguistics* 24.5.